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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 003755

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: THE GOE AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: ANATOMY OF A "SHOWDOWN"

REF: A. CAIRO 3424

[1](#)B. CAIRO 2877

[1](#)C. CAIRO 2433

Classified by A/DCM Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In recent months, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has adopted both increasingly confrontational street tactics and reform-touting rhetoric (as opposed to its traditional Islamist slogans). As of mid-May, the MB's more aggressive approach, and the GOE's response, has built into what is being widely characterized as a "showdown". In departure from past practice, the MB has been staging regular (unauthorized) demonstrations - both in Cairo and in the provinces - on top of provocative political rhetoric. The GOE has responded with mass arrests, including that of prominent MB figure Essam Erian, who was arrested on May 6 reportedly just as he was preparing to announce a bid for the presidency. Beyond its arrest campaign, the GOE, mainly through intermediaries in the media, has stepped up attacks on the group and their motives, and has continued to feed innuendo and speculation about alleged ties to the U.S. as "evidence of treachery." The latest statements by the MB's Supreme Guide could signal an attempt to cool down the confrontation, but the MB's habit of erratic statements and inconsistent actions, combined with general GOE nervousness this spring, may well fuel further tensions between the two sides. End summary.

Retooling for a Changing Environment

[1](#)2. (C) As discussed ref A, Egypt's political environment has become increasingly charged as we move further into this election year. New forces have emerged, issues previously considered off-limits are now openly debated, and some old forces are experimenting with new approaches to take advantage of the changing environment. In this context, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the illegal but partially tolerated political organization which claims to speak for the majority of Egyptians, has in recent months adopted an increasingly vocal and even confrontational approach toward the GOE, advancing their demands for "freedom and political reform."

[1](#)3. (C) The MB has also rejected the GOE's constitutional reform initiative and called on supporters to boycott the May 25 referendum needed to ratify the proposed change. Provocatively, Essam Erian, a prominent MB figure, was widely reported to be preparing a run for president. (Erian was arrested on May 6. He and four MB colleagues remained in jail as of May 16.) Though still decidedly Islamist in its outlook and agenda, the MB's leadership has been tinkering with its public image and has taken up a reformist discourse, putting on the back burner its long-standing demands for implementation of Shari'a law and reestablishment of government by Islamic Caliphate. Most MB watchers agree that this is a tactical shift rather than an indication of evolving ideology and note that while senior members of the MB leadership have changed their tone, in certain fora, this has not trickled down to the rank and file. The MB supported the calls of some Iraqi Sunni leaders to boycott the elections and has consistently hailed the Iraqi insurgency as legitimate resistance justified by Islamic doctrines. They also remain in ideological lockstep with Hamas, and claim the group's late leader, Sheikh Yassin as an MB martyr. The MB has consistently rejected efforts to normalize relations with Israel and continues to deny its right to exist.

[1](#)4. (C) Likely inspired by the feats of Kifaya ("Enough"), the umbrella protest movement that has staged a series of modestly attended but highly publicized anti-regime demonstrations this spring, the MB has also shown an increasing willingness to defy government bans on demonstrations. In so doing, MB leaders have been stressing their right to "freedom of association" and even threatening "civil disobedience" - terms clearly drawn not from their old Islamist playbook but from that of their secular activist

counterparts. This practice represents a break from the past - in recent years the MB has generally shied away from demonstrations that diverged from the pattern of (containable, and, to the GOE, non-threatening) student demonstrations on campus focused principally on the Palestinian Intifada and the war in Iraq.

15. (C) Starting with unauthorized demonstrations in Cairo and the Nile Delta city of Mansoura in late March (ref C), the MB has been regularly holding impromptu public gatherings and demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, and the provinces. These events have often, but not always, been subsequent to Friday noon prayers - gatherings particularly difficult for the GOE to preempt or contain - and have involved numbers of participants (varying significantly from one event to the next) in the thousands. On several occasions, the MB's recent demonstrations have often devolved into skirmishes with riot police deployed to contain them, such as a May 6 clash in Mansoura in which one protester allegedly died from tear gas inhalation, and violent clashes earlier in the first week of May in Fayyoun, in which the police and the MB each claimed dozens of injuries.

The GOE Strikes Back

16. (C) The GOE has struck back with a series of mass arrests, repeatedly reiterated its determination to enforce the constitutional ban on religious political parties, and accused the MB of sowing unrest and subversion. The arrest of Essam Erian, who, though not a member of the group's elite Guidance Bureau, is one of the best known members of the MB leadership, is an escalation on the GOE's part. Though Erian was jailed in the 1990s, the GOE has in recent years refrained from arresting senior MB leaders, presumably in exchange for restraint, on the MB's part. Many observers believe Erian's arrest was intended to pre-empt an announcement to run for president, while MB Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib told the press he believed Erian had infuriated authorities by discussing the GOE's "lack of legitimacy" on a recent interview on Al-Jazeera TV.

17. (C) The arrests conducted by the GOE, occurring both during demonstrations and by late-night visits to wanted-persons' homes, have been occurring on a scale larger than we have seen in recent years. By early May, the MB was claiming that 2400 of its members had been arrested in police sweeps of the organization, and dozens more were arrested over the weekend of May 14. However, there have also been reports of mass-releases - Egyptian media reported the release of 1300 MB detainees on May 10. With these fluctuations, the current number of MB detainees at any given point of time is uncertain.

Public Image and the American Card

18. (C) In addition to its arrest campaign, the GOE and its supporters in the media have been working overtime to attack the MB's image and fan doubts and fears about the nature and intentions of the group. The pro-government weekly Al-Mussawwar published on May 11 a lengthy "special report" on the MB which typified the tone and content of numerous columns and articles in the pro-government press in the first half of May. The piece emphasized the "provocative" and "aggressive" behavior of participants in recent MB demonstrations, asserted that those picked up in recent arrest sweeps were detained under regular criminal statutes rather than the Emergency Law, and cited "voluminous evidence" of the MB's true intent to seize power and impose an authoritarian theocracy in Egypt, in defiance of the constitution's ban on religiously-based political parties. Also fueling fears about the MB's true nature, Musawwar editor Makram Mohammed Ahmad wrote "It is difficult to believe that the group has renounced violence...especially when they continue to have 'secret groupings' (within the organization)."

19. (C) Perhaps most damagingly to the MB, pro-government commentators in the media have continued to accuse the MB of maintaining covert ties with the USG, implicitly tarring the group as traitors and "agents of a foreign power." For example, the May 11 Musawwar article claimed that GOE agents arresting Essam Erian seized a "dossier analyzing the future relationship between the MB and the Americans." The article also stated (as reported in other pieces), that a University professor arrested with his son in an early May sweep of MB members in Zagazig, just north of Cairo, asked that the U.S. Embassy be informed of their arrest as his son is a U.S. citizen.

110. (C) As noted ref B, the MB has on numerous occasions encouraged reports of their being approached by the U.S.,

(usually adding that they rebuffed the overture, in protest of U.S. "crimes against Islam.") Such reports, the group apparently believes, contribute to the MB's stature as a force that international powers can not afford to ignore in Egypt. However, the latest round of articles and commentaries which fueled innuendos implying the MB was a willing pawn in a cynical (though undefined) "American game" in Egypt have apparently become too much for the group's leadership to bear. Several MB sources have recently made categorical denials that the group is in contact with the U.S., and Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib reportedly demanded on May 11 an apology from the GOE for maligning the MB's image by claiming it was in contact with the U.S. For his part, MB Supreme Guide Mahdy Akef, who apparently still believes these reports can be twisted in the group's favor, has told the press several times in the past month that "if" any such contacts were to take place, they would have to be conducted under the supervision of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. (Comment: The notion that the Egyptian MFA would gladly moderate discussions between the USG and the MB is absurd, but airing this prospect seems to suit Akef's purpose of stressing the group's weight and stature on the domestic and international stages. End comment.)

Comment

11. (C) There are signs that the MB would like to ramp down tensions with the GOE. MB Supreme Guide Mahdy Akef, in remarks published on May 12 by the regional Arabic daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, struck a conciliatory tone, asserting "we are not revolutionaries and have no interest in the downfall of the regime," and distancing the MB from the Kifaya protest movement which "uses bad language." He added that the MB "objects to (Kifaya's) slogans against President Mubarak and his son." However, the MB leadership, particularly since Akef took the helm in early 2004, has a track record of making inconsistent and erratic policy statements, and, at least as of the weekend of May 14, there was no sign that it would cease demonstrations in Cairo and the provinces. We judge the MB's habit of making erratic and inconsistent statements to be indicative of a clumsy effort to makeover the public image of what is still, at heart, an inward-looking and intolerant organization ill-equipped to compete on a democratic political stage.

12. (C) The GOE, meanwhile, continues to appear nervous this spring as it wrestles with fierce domestic debate over the modalities for elections later this year, the aftermath of three terrorist attacks in Cairo in April, unprecedented demonstrations not only by the MB, but by the Kifaya protest movement, and others, and even challenges from within the system, such as the threat by judges not to carry out their duties as electoral supervisors (ref A). The GOE may also believe, to some extent, the stories it has helped generate about contacts between the U.S. and the MB; several times in the past two weeks, Embassy officials meeting with key GOE contacts have been "reminded" that any U.S. overture to the MB would be "very dangerous." In this context, a nervous GOE is unlikely to slacken its grip on the MB in the near future. End comment.

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GRAY